

# TO WHAT EXTENT?

INCARNATION AND THE THAI CONTEXT

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## INTRODUCTION

Christian theology is still in its infancy in Thailand. Much of what has been published in Thai is either translated from English or, even if originally published in Thai, can hardly be seriously considered as "theological." Christian theology has just barely begun to take the Christian experience in Thailand and the Christian encounter with Thai Buddhist culture seriously. Indeed, it is difficult at present to even be able to discern what directions Christian theology "done in the Thai context" might take.

A recent retreat of the ecumenical staff (missionaries and other expatriates) related to the Church of Christ in Thailand suggests that there is a pressing need for the development of Thai theological traditions. That retreat was strongly tainted with a sense of unease, as if something was seriously wrong not only with mission work but with the very life of the Church in Thailand. One hears from other places strong criticism of the forms which Protestant and Catholic Christianity have taken in Thailand. It is time and past time that the Church in Thailand begin to reflect theologically on its life and mission.

This collection of essays has grown out of a mutual feeling shared by the participants that this critical need for Christian theology arising from the Thai context must be addressed. It is a modest attempt to make a contribution to theological thinking in Thailand. The participants in the Khun Tan Round Table (23-25 March 1982) are individuals who also shared a common desire to reflect upon the dilemmas of Thai Christianity and a willingness to do so openly. These essays are the product of three days of discussions that were carried out with a remarkable sense of comradeship inspite of divergent theological and cultural backgrounds.

The Khun Tan Round Table was an attempt to reflect upon our various experiences of the Church in Thailand. As one of our number put it, we were engaged in a series of "thought experiments" the outcome of which was uncertain. Thus, these discussions were a statement of the faith shared by all that God frees us to use our minds and to use them creatively. He accepts us in our intellectual stumblings



and fumbblings. There is a real sense in which it cannot be said of the Thai Church that there has been too much talk and too little action. Quite the opposite. There have been many long decades of haphazard but always pressured activity with too few hours left for quiet, creative reflection.

These essays address three audiences: In the first place, the five participants are all Westerners, and what is written here will probably have most value for other foreigners related to church work in Thailand. We hope, however, that the essays will have value for our second audience, the Thai Church, as well. We do not claim to speak for that Church. But we do hope our shared thoughts will be useful to it, because we have known it (for varying periods of time) as a gracious and long-suffering if, at times, perplexing friend and host. Our third audience is more diffuse: those who find themselves in situations parallel to our own in which they too seek to wrestle with basic issues of Christian faith in the framework of complex cultural situations.

How useful these essays finally prove to be we must leave to the judgment of our readers. We would ask only for your indulgence and understanding that we sought at Khun Tan to struggle after understanding as God gives the ability to search for such. You will find different approaches to God's Truth, but we trust that you will also find a deeply shared commitment to know that Truth and a humbly shared realization that we have not lived up to it.

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RETURNED TO JOURNAL  
THE ROUND TABLE

Herbert R. Swanson

Khun Tan is a quiet, green, semi-remote mountain retreat in northern Thailand. It is a generally steep hike of two to three hours up to one of the coolest spots in Thailand. It is a good place not only for relaxation but also for a few hours of reflection and meditation. Thus, the rustic cabins at Khun Tan provided an ideal location for conducting a round table discussion about the life of the Church in Thailand.

The purpose of this essay is to describe those discussions as they unfolded in this idyllic (but pollution haunted) setting. It is hoped that this essay will give the reader some insight into the actual discussions and some "feel" for how its issues emerged and developed.

The idea for this Round Table grew out of the Ecumenical Staff Retreat of the Church of Christ in Thailand which was held at Tak in October, 1981. In the various presentations given at that retreat, I heard three individuals raising some very vital theological questions in strikingly similar ways but out of quite divergent cultural and religious backgrounds. Rob Collins, Anders Hovemyr, and Philip Hughes were all asking about the state of the Thai Church in light of the Christ Event. Does the Church reflect the Event? Their answers were muted but not very encouraging. In pursuing this theme individually with them, the idea for this Round Table arose. We quickly agreed that our "circle" needed to be widened with the inclusion of Father Sigmund Laschenski, S.J., a good friend and one who shares a concern that the Church give a Christ-like witness.

Our guiding theme was the nature of the Christian faith in Thailand in light of the Incarnation. Four papers were presented as discussion starters. We met for a total of twelve hours of discussions. What I will do here is to describe thematically the major issues that arose from the Round Table discussions. In years to come, some of these issues will play a critical role in the development of Thai theological styles and themes. Also included is a transcript of one long and important exchange of ideas that was the

culmination of our discussions.

Throughout the three days of these discussions we found ourselves shifting through three major subjects that quickly became locked together in quite complex ways. These three subjects were: Incarnation. The Church. Thai Culture. Stated most briefly, what we found ourselves dealing with was: What God did in Christ. What that means for the "community of believers." And, how Christ and the Church fit into or are in conflict with Thai culture.

We began with Incarnation.

For a time it seemed as though our discussions would not be able to move beyond the awesomely difficult task of trying to describe what we meant by "incarnation." There was the question of approach. Should we approach Incarnation by trying to define the Being of Christ or by trying to describe the Activities of Christ? The second great issue before us was the role of the Incarnation within God's total scheme of "salvation history." Was God's coming to us in Jesus unique? How did it differ from his coming to us in Moses, for example? Was Christ different in degree or in kind?

Our aim was simply to achieve a working definition of Incarnation so that we had a mutually understood point of reference for launching into other issues. Finding such a mutual point was not easy. In one key exchange, Philip Hughes asked,

Do we have to stick to one model of the Incarnation? It would seem to me that we have different theologies in John's Gospel and in Mark's. Isn't this diversity an authority which gives us the authority to have a diversity of theology? And, if Incarnation is merely a human statement about Jesus and his relationship to God which is something that ultimately there is going to be mystery about, cannot we criticize the notion of Incarnation?

Anders Hovemyr immediately responded,

Yes, there are different christologies in the New Testament that should give us freedom to approach the Incarnation with a certain freedom of mind. However, I would say that in all of these christologies of the New Testament you find the basic, underlying conviction that in this Jesus God came to us, not just in a unique way, but in an exclusive way. It is not just like Moses.

And Rob Collins observed,

My orientation toward our discussion is one that is less concerned with the ontological and more on the fruits of the Incarnation. Looking at the Incarnation as a model is a more fruitful approach.

Eventually the Round Table did formulate a basic statement, and that statement grew out of the following remarks by Philip:

In Jesus, God has come to Man. God has spoken to us. God has communicated to us. More than that, God has related to us. We meet God in Jesus. We don't meet all aspects of God in Jesus. We don't meet God's infiniteness. We don't meet God's omnipresence. We meet his love.

Further discussion led to this statement: By Incarnation we mean that in Jesus God seeks out and meets us and we meet Him. The brevity and simplicity of this formulation should not be interpreted as merely "passing by" the concept of Incarnation with a brief nod. For, in these few words we all understood that in Christ God has done something for us that is beyond our comprehension yet speaks to us at the core of our lives.

Our consideration of the Incarnation and our differences regarding it were in no sense laid to rest. The Incarnation remained a central concern because, as one member of the Round Table put it, "Out of Incarnation grows inevitably the ministry of the Church." Our concern, then, was not simply with what God did historically in Jesus of Nazareth but also with what we as Christians must do in response to the Incarnation. In that event God did something of overwhelming significance to our understanding of God Himself. It was an event that involved suffering, obedience, and a total self-giving by Christ. And, on this key point there was no difference among us: it is clear from Scripture that the Church is expected to respond in servanthood, obedience, and suffering to that of Christ.

The stage was now set. We began to deal with the issue of the relationship of Christian faith in light of the Incarnate One to Thai culture.

The twin questions of how the Church has related to Thai culture and how it should relate to that culture are inevitably entwined. The historical question of how the Church has related was of prime importance throughout our

discussions, and by-and-large the Round Table's interpretation of Thai Church history in light of the Incarnation was gloomy. Rob raised this historical question from the perspective of his particular concern with styles of leadership by asking, "Why have we been so faithless to the revelation of God's way of doing things by way of Jesus? The Christ-like way of leadership was submerged somehow." Father Sigmund Laschenski was especially struck by the contrast between the Christian missionary and the Buddhist monk:

We [the missionaries] are the big do-gooders. Great. They admire us for that. But that is no comparison to the Buddhist monk who is devoted to the simple life, withdraws from the world, and puts down his desires. We would call it an eschatological sign: one who is striving for the transcendent. And we get angry and excited. But any of these monks you meet, these really good monks, they have a serenity, a peace. It's beautiful.

There emerged a number of sharply focused criticisms of Christian missions as they have been conducted in Thailand. These criticisms included the following:

The missionaries have trained Thai Christians to be too much like them in ways that are alien to Thai culture.

The missionaries themselves have not lived incarnationally. They have lived in wealth and prestige and have "lorded it over" the Thai converts.

The missionaries have been extremely negative about Thai culture. They have consistently assumed that their own culture represents a higher civilization. They have not risked involvement in Thai culture and have always assumed narrowly that they had all "truth."

While the missionaries had contact with the "little people" in earlier periods, they soon became too involved in setting up and running institutions and lost that contact.

The missionaries have not been particularly sensitive to the real needs of the people nor the way in which the people express their needs.

One facet of the problem of missionary relations to culture grew out of our examination of the uses of missionary technology. The missionaries were deeply

involved in the transfer of modern technologies to Thailand. It was argued by some participants that this activity was largely inappropriate because it was symbolic of the whole missionary attitude: the need to be "efficient" and "in charge" rather than humble servants. It was another symbol of their apartness and their failure to identify with the Thai people. However, as discussion continued it was pointed out that missionary technologies were also important to helping people particularly medically and in education. It was noted that the government and people generally wanted missionary assistance in these areas. Whatever their limitations, missionary technological skills were an important ministry.

This process of black-and-white slipping into gray happened again as we examined the relationship of missionary leadership styles and the influence of those styles on Thai church leadership. It was argued that the missionaries did not lead in the model of Christ. They did not teach through example that church leadership should take on the marks of Christ. The result has been a Thai church leadership that dominates the Church and often seems bent on destroying the Spirit in the Church rather than moving with the Spirit. Rob gave several clear examples of local churches in the North where church leadership is over-bearing and selfish.

But is the historical process so clear-cut? Was it only or even primarily missionary activities that have determined the styles of present Thai church leadership?

One modifying factor that came into our discussions was that of the basic Thai social pattern of the patron-client relationship in which people are defined by their status in relationship to each other. Are not contemporary styles of church leadership influenced at least as much by this pattern of Thai social relationships?

Furthermore, what should be the Christian response to the patron-client social pattern? We found ourselves torn in two directions. On the one hand, there was a desire to be open to this pattern. How could we as foreigners be demanding changes in basic patterns of social behaviour? Furthermore, the ideal of the Patron has much good content in it: a patron is beneficent and cares for the client. The patron is called upon to help others, sometimes even sacrificially. Yet, at the same time there seems to be an inherent conflict between the notion of the patron and that of the Incarnation. Jesus led through servanthood and being humbled. Patrons even at their best do not take on the true marks of servanthood and suffering.

What, then, has been the determinative factor in shaping Thai church leadership? Missionary example? Social patterns? This issue became even more complex when we began to discuss the response of the Thai Church to missionary activities. For one thing, we began to realize that many of the early missionaries who were responsible for the first generations of Thai converts were, in fact, very close to the "little people." They spent months and months on itineration in villages, talking to people, and living with them. Their converts were often from the margins of society suggesting that the missionaries were in close contact with all levels of society.

On the other hand, the contemporary leadership of the Thai Church is a wealthy, well-educated, and very comfortable elite that has become more distant from the average church member than the missionaries used to be. Perhaps, we began to speculate, the "problem" of the present condition of the Church was not simply caused by the missionaries. Anders wondered,

Would it be fair to say that during the first period [of church history in Thailand] much of the Christian message talked to the little people and met their needs and thereby created a group—educated and healthy people—who in their turn failed to do what was done to them? And, as they are now the ones who form the backbone of the Church, the Church's interest is in them...The Thais themselves who had grown up in the Church either were not impressed or not even aware that it was now their turn to address the needs of the grass roots again.

Father Laschenski noted parallels in the Thai Catholic Church particularly now that the Catholic Church is widely engaged in educating the children of the wealthy, upper-class exploiters of society. An important segment of the Church, Thai and missionary, seems to have forgotten just these "little people" we were talking about.

This line of thinking raises some troubling yet highly crucial issues for the Thai Church. There has been a tendency in the Church to idolize the past generations of missionaries. There has been little inclination to deal with them critically. Even more to the point, there has been little inclination to examine both what the missionaries have done and how the Thai Church has responded to missionary activity. It seems that if Mission and Church



are to be partners in servanthood—the "ideal" of much missionary and Thai thinking—then they must also be "partners" in the failure to create a Church that lives out the Incarnation within Thai society.

As we discussed the nature of missionary leadership, we discovered another type of problem that brought us back again to a more critical attitude about the missionaries themselves. The problem emerged in this way: The message of the Incarnation is one of self-giving, self-sacrifice, and self-denial. We know the missionaries have not really lived that way. And we also know that in this society there is a great amount of human suffering. How, then, can those who are comfortable bring a message of self-giving and suffering to a society that is already experiencing suffering? How can a comfortable Church leadership do so? Is this not arrogance of the worst sort? Herb Swanson offered the following suggestion:

Our emphasis is not that we necessarily must suffer but that our perception of God turns things upside down and makes what is great small and what is small great. This is hope for the people who are suffering: that there is healing for people who are suffering. We have to think of two audiences: the audience that claims to be Christian and refuses to carry through on that claim. We ourselves are in that category. The second audience is those who are suffering and need to hear the healing message. The message to us is primarily one of servanthood but to the suffering it is primarily one of hope.

The question of Christ as a suffering servant brought out the issue of whether we can speak meaningfully about a God who suffers within a Thai Buddhist framework where suffering in all of its forms is a reflection and result of craving. Father Laschenski noted that such a question is not relevant to the vast majority of poorly educated people. Nevertheless, our brief discussion of this matter helped us to bring more clearly into focus what proved to be one of the key issues of the Round Table. Anders framed the question,

The big question what we have now raised is...to what extent can the Christian community or should the Christian community reinterpret its understanding within cultural context? And what is that which is so central to Christianity that we cannot or should not modify it?

Philip offered a creative approach to this issue by suggesting that we were, perhaps, framing the whole question of Christianity and culture improperly. He urged us to examine the culturally conditioned model of thinking we were ourselves exhibiting. By that model, we were assuming that there are certain propositions so "fundamental" that to remove them is to destroy faith itself. This model assumes a foundation upon which all else must be necessarily built. Philip questioned whether this model of thinking is really very useful.

He urged us to consider a different style of thinking that is patterned after the manner of a spider's web. The web is held together by many strands some of which are more important than others but no one of which is essential to supporting the web. Strands can be removed and replaced at will. Our perceptions form a web of meaning that can be changed and remodelled as the need arises. The result is a structure of thinking that is at once more stable and more flexible than the more traditional foundational structure of thought.

Philip's proposition that we needed to think about our own models of thinking and his proposed alternative threw some light (though we did not see it then) on one major issue that distinguished us, one from another: the manner in which Christian faith addresses a Buddhist culture. In the shifting and experimenting and the desire for mutual understanding, it did become clear that there were two approaches to the relationship of Christianity to Thai culture among the Round Table participants.

The one approach may be described as being primarily concerned that Christ be understood meaningfully within culture. It was Philip who articulated this approach.

Basically, then, what I've argued is that theology, the Christian faith, needs to be expressed, if it is going to be assimilated at all, in terms that are assimilatable. It has to be expressed within Thai concepts or in the framework of the presuppositions of ideas that fit within the culture in Thailand. And, if this is not done, there is either misunderstanding, or else there is likely to be learning without assimilation, or there is going to be rejection.

His position was that Christ can be known only through culture and language. He argued that this is precisely the meaning of the Incarnation, that God took the risk of

being misunderstood by coming to us in the form of one man who spoke one language and lived in one historical period.

It was Rob who most clearly articulated the second approach in which he saw a Christ who stands over against culture. Rob said,

I've always thought of Jesus as shattering whatever preconceptions our culture has. And sometimes finding cultural patterns that are meaningful destroys the real Jesus. He becomes a prisoner of cultural models. We force him into those models and he is no longer the judge who makes a critique of our lives and our society.

Rob also pointed out that Christ himself was greatly at odds with his own culture expounding ideas that were very much in tension with basic systems of belief.

This discussion of the relationship of Christ to culture raised for Anders a somewhat different question: that of cultural identity in a pluralistic society. Christ certainly identified himself fully with humanity and took on one human culture as his own. He became truly one with those people to whom he was sent. He was Jewish in every sense of the term.

But, then, with whom does a Thai Karen Christian, for example, identify? Should the Karen Christian strive to identify with the Karen culture or with Thai culture? It has been generally accepted by both Thai and Karen that to be Karen means to be "non-Thai." The result has been serious cultural tension between groups and within the lives of ethnic minority peoples. Father Laschenski noted that this has been a serious problem in the Thai Catholic Church which is primarily composed of minority peoples.

In the context of this discussion, Anders said, "My vision for the Church in Thailand is that one day these Christians will be able to say that, 'I am fully Karen and fully Thai.' And, perhaps, that can be done only in the framework of the Christian Church." Herb responded with the thought that the issue of Christ and cultural identity in a pluralistic society becomes crucial only when the social and political forms deny any individual or group the possibility of fully expressing their cultural identity. Then the Christian must identify with the oppressed.



We turned then to the question of the Thai Christian interpretation of the Incarnation. In following up on his thesis that theology must be assimilated to culture in order to be meaningful, Philip argued that a basic model by which the Incarnation is understood in Thailand is that of a "Royal Visit." Thai Christians perceive Jesus as being like the King of Thailand who visits his people and is graciously, humbly received by them. The image of the Royal Visit has great meaning in Thai society where the King is a highly visible presence, where the royal family spends great amounts of time visiting the people, and where the King is seen as the corner stone of political order.

We found some data that seemed to confirm in a tentative way the idea that the Incarnation is viewed by Thai Christians as a Royal Visit. For example, Christmas and Nativity are extremely important to the Thai Church while Easter and Resurrection are far less emphasized. And, at Christmas the Christians openly use the idea expressed in royal language (the vocabulary system used for royalty and for things holy) that they are receiving the Royal Visitor, Jesus. Indeed, the very fact that royal language is used in referring to Jesus was another confirmation that he is viewed as being the visiting King, set apart from other people.

The Round Table tended to accept that Thai Christians have in fact reinterpreted Incarnation in terms of the Royal Visit. But there was considerable discussion as to the adequacy of this interpretation. The strengths of the concept of Royal Visit were found in that the Thai Monarchy is highly revered and is close to the people. Its weakness was that it does not bring out the servant role nor the place of Crucifixion and Resurrection in the life of the Church.

One thing we all agreed upon was that whatever the adequacy or inadequacy of the Royal Visit as an interpretation of the Incarnation, it is true that Christianity has come to Thailand as an essentially alien religion. It has continued to be an alien religion in ways that are most unfortunate. This led Anders to speculate,

If you would be able to find a new and meaningful Christian expression for Thai cultural patterns you could save the culture but discard its old expression, replace the Buddhist expressions of certain cultural patterns with Christian ones. We have failed to do this and this is why very often the adopting of Christianity means adoption a strange kind of culture.

We noted that there have been some attempts to find such expressions of a christianized Thai culture including Catholic attempts to give a Christian content to various Thai rituals and festivals.

But are such attempts valid? Is it enough simply to try to clothe Christian beliefs with Thai social forms? Does that really make the Church any less alien? These questions brought us to the culmination of our three days of discussions. Once again basically different orientations to the place of Christianity in Thai culture began to appear.

The issue that emerged at this culmination was that of the relationship of Christianity to Thai Buddhism. For, whichever way we turned, we found ourselves finally confronted with the fact of Buddhism as the center and the base of Thai culture. The issue before us was whether we relate to Buddhism as a religion that is less adequate than Christianity and fails to comprehend ultimate truths or as a sister faith and ally in the struggle with evil and suffering.

Father Laschenski warned us that "the human hand" is a corrupting force in all religions including our own. It corrupts the expressions of faith. He said, "Don't get too attached to these expressions but try to keep open to the Truth. The Truth transcends all of these expressions." Herb responded with the thought that perhaps Incarnation and the Buddhist understanding of Enlightenment might both encompass certain basic religious truths and that in Thai culture it might be more appropriate to speak of Enlightenment. However, Anders was troubled by the thought that there are certain truths of the Christian faith that cannot be either denied nor altered. Rob further urged that it would be hypocritical for Christians to speak about the Gospel in ways that did not really convey its true content.

Many strands of our previous discussions suddenly came together and in the verbatim below the reader will find a number of themes already described earlier. This verbatim is offered both to provide an example of the Round Table discussions and to describe the culminating exchange of ideas. The reader is again urged to remember that the ideas expressed here are very much in the manner of thought experiments exploring the frontiers of our faith.

In the course of our discussion on the relationship of Christianity to Thai Buddhism, it was suggested that since Christianity is alien to Thai culture and its systems of



meaning perhaps the aim of Christian missions and work in Thailand should not be to convert people to Christianity. The following exchange then took place:

Anders        Is there anything wrong with wanting people to become Christian?

Herb           Yes, That is not being other-directed but rather doctrine--oriented. We should be primarily interested in what it is that is meaningful for the other. If Christianity can be meaningful and make people better, Great! But we must be aware of the problem of religious manipulation.

Anders        Paul honestly wanted others to have what he had found. He was not coercing people, but he was still honestly convinced that there was no other way. His experience of this truth came from his experience of Judaism.

Philip        Paul had a genuine concern for the other. If we had been through Buddhism as Paul went through Judaism perhaps we would be speaking in different ways than from what we are saying now, as outsiders.

Herb           Now we're back into that exclusive frame of mind where to be Christian is to exclude being Buddhist.

Philip        For Paul, Christ was the fulfillment of Judaism, but we haven't found the fulfillment for Buddhism. Our attitude has been to replace it.

Anders        But would it be honest to say that Christ is the fulfillment of Buddhism? I am, frankly, very uneasy with that position.

Herb           I agree. The struggle of Jesus was a struggle within the tradition of Judaism itself. Jesus reinterpreted and shattered it in many ways, but he was not alien to it whereas he is alien to Buddhism. Isn't he? He represents an outside religious tradition no matter how you represent it.

- Anders Even if we do our best to reinterpret Jesus there is going to be an element that will remain alien.
- Herb Then what are we doing here?
- Anders If true life is to be found in Christ and in him alone there is no question why we are here. Christ is the person that we must share.
- Herb But can we say that Life is found only in Christ?
- Rob I realize that for a Westerner to say that Life can be found only in Christ does sound arrogant. But the original claimant of that was not us but Jesus himself. To say that Life is only found in Christ is arrogant only because we do not live up to the claim of Christ himself.
- Anders Yes, it is humbling. But our validating Christ is not what is involved. Here is what matters to me: Eventhough I am impressed with much in Buddhism, yet Life is in Him.
- Herb What we have touched upon here is the crucial factor in determining how the Christian Church in Thailand will shape its own future. I hear what Anders and Rob are saying. They are expressing what for them are the core statements of their lives. And, yet, we are still dealing with exclusives. It is this constant building of walls by Christianity that is my struggle. Christianity always seems to create oppositions and build walls. If we are to be against something it ought to be oppression and injustice.
- Anders I cannot negate the statements of those who say they find Life in the Buddha. I can't say, "No," to that. It must be respected as a true statement.
- Philip It is much better if we think in "web" form. Then there are no essential statements that create this kind of confusion.
- Anders Yes, that is a practical way. It can be helpful. Is this just a personality matter that causes us to think differently?

- Philip        It is a matter of identification. You identify yourself with Christianity...
- Anders        No, I identify myself in that sense with the idea of trying to be "truly human," but how can we be that apart from Christ?
- Philip        Yes, truly human, but then I can conceive of myself as rejecting Christianity. Not that I want to or that I will. But it is possible.
- Anders        But, then, what is truly human? In a world with so many dehumanizing forces, how do we know?
- Philip        Being human means having the freedom to make my own decisions about myself.
- Anders        That is too philosophical a view.
- Philip        Think of the web. There is no one part that is absolutely essential to my identity.
- Fr L.         We find Life in Christ exclusively. That is the Christian teaching. We have to accept that message. Yes, that is true. But, Christ is for all people including all of those who never heard about him. What about them? We can't just write them off. Christ died for all. There is something here that is missing, something that we don't know about. There is some other way of finding Life in Christ besides being a professed Christian.
- Anders        Yes, God does have witness in all of these cultures. But should we just leave it there?
- Fr L.         Ah, that is a problem. We see the world needs Christ. In Buddhism, for example, so many fail to accept it really. Yes, there is a need for Christ too.
- Anders        True humanity in Christ is what pushes me to share Christ. It is the ideal of justice, human worth, and dignity.
- Fr L.         Human rights is a Christian conception. There is no basis for it in Buddhist thinking. Human rights has come from outside and has made an



impact on Buddhism. Basically, it is Christian and from the West.

Herb            There is another side to this, however. In the West there has been a great interest in Eastern meditation. And here we can see the idea of cross-fertilization. We can open doors for each other and help each other.

Fr L.           But we have our own traditions of meditation.

Anders          And I have trouble with Zen meditation. Is it really useful to us and our own tradition of meditation as silence before God?

Philip          But that is not the point. The point is that Buddhist meditation has been taken in the West and that this is a judgment on the inadequacies of our own religion.

It had not been our intention to end our discussions on the topic of the relationship of Christianity to Buddhism in Thailand. Yet, we found ourselves drawn to the topic. For in it are some of the most basic issues confronting the Thai Church and Christian missions in Thailand today. Is it possible for us to deny that salvation, Life, is in Christ alone and yet remain faithful to the biblical witness and the tradition of the Church? Yet, does not that stance doom Christian faith to a position fundamentally alien to Buddhist Thailand? There are absolutely essential theological concerns being expressed here. How can we know Truth apart from Christ? On the other hand, does holding to Christ mean that we have to cut ourselves off from the rich Buddhist heritage when our real enemies should be sin and injustice?

The Round Table embodied two tendencies that at some points seemed to be in conflict. On the one hand there was the tendency to see Thai society including its major religion as being in need of conversion to Christ. On the other hand there was the tendency to want to enter into conversation with Buddhism as being an ally of Christ. It may well be that Father Laschenski hit upon the problem of these two tendencies: there is something that we still do not understand. One feels this in the seemingly paradoxical statements made by Anders that Life is found only (unconditionally) in Christ; and, yet, we cannot deny that a Buddhist has made a true statement in claiming to

find Life (unconditionally) in the teachings of the Buddha.

But, did we ever speak to that initial unease that I mentioned at the beginning as being at the root of this Round Table? Did we discover what was "wrong" with Missions and with the Church? Yes, we did. All five of us agreed that there have been two essential weaknesses that continue to plague the Church in Thailand today. First of all, both missionaries and church leaders have failed to live incarnationally. Secondly, because the missionaries and the Church have not lived as Christ would have them live, they have failed to address the message of Christ to the culture seriously and meaningfully. Now, in the real world where there exist only shades of gray these charges need to be hedged with numerous disclaimers and modifiers. Yet, the central thrust remains the same: the Church (mission & Thai) has been arrogant and "lordly" in its relationship to the Thai world.

What is most interesting about the direction of our discussions was that the interplay of Incarnation, Church, and Thai Culture brought us finally face-to-face with Buddhism. Historically, both missionaries and the Thai Church have tried to put as much distance as possible between themselves and Buddhism. That has meant, in effect, they have tried to divorce themselves from that which gives meaning to life in Thai society.

If the Church is to develop a truly indigenous life-style and theological expression that is something more than a mere imitation of the West, then the Church will first have to come to terms with its Buddhist environment. One finds it difficult to believe that the Church will ever be able to confidently address other issues until it has discovered what it means to be Christian among Buddhist friends and relatives. The issue we did not answer that needs to be dealt with more clearly is, to what extent does Christian faith need to be re-stated in the language of the people for it to become truly relevant to them? To what extent must Christianity stand over against Buddhism? To what extent must it ally itself with the best, most creative elements in Buddhism? At present the Thai Church has, superficially at least, accepted many Western forms and ways of expressing their faith. Is change necessary? And, again, we must ask, to what extent? What, after all, does it mean to loose ourselves for Christ's sake in this time and place?



# TOWARDS A THEOLOGY OF INCARNATION IN THE THAI CONTEXT

Anders Hovemyr

## I. INTRODUCTION

In our discussions at Khun Tan, time after time we came up with the observation that the life of the Christian community in Thailand suggests that "Incarnation" as such is either an unknown concept to most Christians or is viewed in a very narrow sense.

A large portion of Christians equate "Incarnation" with "nativity". Such equation is of course understandable as the most important day of the Thai church year is Christmas (followed, possibly, by the harvest festival) and Easter is rather insignificant for most believers.

In our discussions at Khun Tan, we were exploring several possibilities as to how "Incarnation" could play a much more significant role in Christian thinking and reflection in Thailand. Perhaps the categories which were used to explain "Incarnation" were not adequate categories and did not communicate the essence of "Incarnation" (at least the "essence" as we saw it), but there may be other categories available in the Thai cultural and religious experience which may indeed be very useful. Philip Hughes' paper explores this suggestion further.

My purpose in this paper is to suggest some guidelines towards a theology of the Incarnation in the Thai context. The purpose of these guidelines is to serve as a point of departure for further reflections. For obvious reasons a theology of the Incarnation in the Thai context must grow forth from within the Thai Christian community itself.

## II. GUIDELINES FOR A THEOLOGY OF INCARNATION IN THE THAI CONTEXT.

The following three subheadings are simply selected as useful pointers and do not, in any way, exclude other meaningful possibilities.

1. An understandable definition.

The doctrine of Incarnation has often been tied to the Chalcedonian formula in the Christian church:<sup>1</sup>

One and the same Christ, Son, Lord, Only-begotten, recognized in two natures, without confusion, without division, without separation; the distinction of natures being in no way annuled by the union, but rather the characteristics of each nature being preserved and coming together to form one person and substance not as parted or separated into two persons, but one and the same Son and only begotten God the Word, Lord Jesus Christ; even as the prophets from earliest times spoke of him, and our Lord Jesus Christ himself taught us, and the creed of the Fathers has handed down to us.

Such a definition was meaningful and useful in the 5th century, but it has become more and more difficult to grasp for the believers over the centuries. In the beginning of the 1900s there was a theological attempt in Europe to redefine the meaning of Incarnation. Karl Barth suggested that perhaps the truth which is expressed in abstract terms in the early Christian creeds and formulas could be more clearly, accurately and adequately expressed in terms of Jesus' life and acts.

Such suggestion seems to be very attractive in any Asian setting, not the least in the Thai context, for two reasons.

a. Terms like "essence", "nature", "substance" are practically untranslatable into languages of the tribal peoples in Thailand. There are simply no available terms or concepts and any word newly coined to describe these categories is likely to be misunderstood. Even in the Thai language such terms are translated in a somewhat ambiguous way (to say the least)

b. A more important reason, however, is that Incarnation described in terms of Jesus' life and acts (i.e. the story of Jesus) would be easily understandable in the Asian setting. Even when terms like "substance", "nature" etc. do have suitable equivalents in any Asian language, they are still abstract concepts, easily misunderstood in a society where profound truths are often expressed in the form of a story (may it be the ancient epoch of the Ramayana or the story of the Creator God Kche Jwe among the Karens).

After lengthy discussion at Khun Tan we arrived at a tentative formula (which is by no means new and has indeed been suggested in a somewhat different form by other theologians) which might serve as a basis of further reflection: "In Jesus of Nazareth God<sup>2</sup> seeks and meets men and women and in Him they meet God".

## 2. In search of a true humanity.

Any theology of the Incarnation that takes seriously the fact that in Jesus of Nazareth we meet God must address itself to the question of the nature and destiny of mankind.

In Jesus of Nazareth we can see not only the revelation of the true dimensions of human nature, but also the destiny of mankind. The Incarnation suggests that "becoming children of God" (or perhaps more appropriately "sonship") is the destiny of mankind and true humanity reaches its culmination in this man - Jesus of Nazareth. Consequently, the very nature of life in Southeast Asia, in Thailand in the midst of dehumanising forces calls for a responsible answer from us to the question: "Where is true humanity to be found?".

## 3. Incarnation as a "risk".

The radical nature of the Incarnation cannot be fully understood until the risk involved is taken into account.

The New Testament suggests that God is a dialogical being (Hebrews 1:1-2) and in the Incarnation he has addressed mankind, entered into dialogue with mankind, in form of His son. In giving himself in this manner with utmost truth, however, God exposed himself to doubt and misunderstanding.

Dialogue involves always a certain amount of risk and God was prepared to take this risk in the ministry, humiliation and death of his Son. In that cry of forsakenness and powerlessness from the cross:

"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34) God is indeed open to doubt and misunderstanding, yet, the spirit of the Incarnation finds perhaps its clearest expression in that cross. In that selfless giving of his utmost love, daring the tremendous risk involved, God has truly communicated himself, "... he has spoken to us by his son (Hebrews 1:2).



### III. THE INCARNATION OF THE CHURCH

Incarnation understood the way this paper suggests, has certain implications for the mission and ministry of the Christian community. If through the Incarnation God truly gave himself and became man in a particular historical situation, then for the Christian community it is not sufficient to bear witness in words to that historical, unique event of Incarnation some 2000 years ago, but the church itself is confronted with the challenge to become incarnate in every historical situation, in every human culture.

Such incarnation of the church in the particular culture and situation of the people is not an option or an alternative for the Christian community, but it is an "imperative" (a must). The reasons for this are twofold.

Firstly, the church must bear in mind that her Lord was known during his earthly ministry as "the carpenter from Nazareth." The entire ministry of Jesus is a brilliant example of a total (though not necessarily uncritical) identification with a particular group of people in a certain time in history.

Secondly, the missionary nature of the Christian community calls for such an incarnation of the church. Unless the church can be totally one with the people to whom she is sent, unless she can be totally "localized", there will be a definite contrast (and perhaps also conflict) between her message and praxis and she will<sup>3</sup> be always open to misunderstanding based on her foreignness.

### IV. THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE INCARNATION OF THE CHURCH

Having said this much in general, now we must raise the question what does this mean for the Christian community in Thailand in a very practical sense.

Based on what previously has been established in this paper, incarnation of the church in Thailand would mean that to be Christian means to be fully Thai, accepting the rich cultural and ethnic identity which belongs to the Thai people. Or, to refer to another important section of the Christian community in Thailand, to be Christian means to be fully Chinese, Karen, Lahu etc. and in a similar fashion accepting the characteristics and culture of the Chinese, Karen, Lahu etc. peoples.

The question then arises immediately, to what extent should or can the Christian community redefine the meaning of ethnic identity? To make this question more explicit, it would read: Does localization mean for the Chinese Christian in Thailand a true acceptance of being Chinese or Thai? In a similar way: Does localization mean for the Karen Christian a true acceptance of being Karen or Thai? At present it is generally understood in Thailand that one cannot "be Thai" and "be Karen." The two are mutually exclusive.

In a more general sense the understanding of the incarnation of the church in the Thai context focuses the attention on the problem of minority. Here I do not refer to the fact that less than 1% of the population of Thailand is Christian. Rather I wish to call attention to the fact that a large portion of this Christian minority comes from a cultural and ethnic background which is essentially "non-Thai".<sup>4</sup> It is not only a question of minority, but a minority made up by groups of peoples which are marginal to society. This is true of both Catholics and Protestants.<sup>5</sup>

In the light of this fact, then, the challenge of Incarnation for the Christian community in Thailand is not only that the church itself must be incarnate in the cultures of the different ethnic entities, but also at the same time such incarnation of the church ought to break ground for a new understanding of ethnic identity in the Thai context. Such new understanding could give vision to the Christian community that it is possible to be fully members of one's ethnic unit (e.g. "fully Karen") and at the same time be "fully Thai".

Notes

<sup>1</sup>In this paper Incarnation (with "I") refers to the historical event of Incarnation some 2000 years ago, while incarnation (with "i") refers to the incarnation of the church.

For the whole Definition of Chalcedon see Bettenson, H. Documents of the Christian Church (London: Oxford University Press, 1947), pp. 72-73.

<sup>2</sup>The theological writings of Karl Barth and Wolfhart Pannenberg guided us in arriving at this formula.

<sup>3</sup>The term "localization" has been introduced by Bryan de Krester in an article in Asia Focus (vol. 5, no. 3) some 12 years ago.

<sup>4</sup>The expression "non-Thai" is somewhat unfortunate, but it is possibly the only term that includes the Chinese in Thailand, the tribal peoples as well as the population of the northern provinces, the so called "Lanna - Thai" or "Lao". This latest mentioned group does not in the strict sense belong to the category of "non-Thai", but from a church historical perspective such grouping can be justified.

<sup>5</sup>I have no exact figures on Catholics in this respect, but according to information received from local sources in Chiang Mai "more than half of all" Catholics in Thailand are either ethnic Chinese/Vietnamese or else come from families where such ethnic/cultural influence has been very strong.

Within the Christian community related to the Church of Christ in Thailand a majority of church members are Lanna Thais. The second largest Protestant group in the country is a tribal church, the Thailand Karen Baptist Convention.



Among the Protestant groups outside of the Church of Christ in Thailand the relationship of Thais - "non-Thais" is about 50-50.

These figures are of course only rough estimates, but one can get a fair idea as to within which ethnic and cultural environments the different denominations and churches have their members by studying the Thailand's Christian Directory 1982 (Bangkok: Suthep Chaiwan, 1982).

# INCARNATION AND THE COMMUNICATION OF THE GOSPEL IN THAILAND

Philip Hughes

## Introduction

Why is the church in Thailand so small? After 150 years of Protestant missionary work involving the expenditure of vast amounts of human energy and money, the Protestant church includes considerably less than 1% of the population. Indeed, in northern Thailand, overall the church has grown slower than the rate of population growth since 1915.

It was suggested in the discussion at Khun Tan that one of the reasons for this slow growth is that there has been a failure in communication. The Gospel has not been presented in a way that it could easily be understood; nor in a way in which it has been seen to meet needs of which people were conscious.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to decide whether that suggestion is true or false, or to what extent it has been a factor in the slow growth of the church. Rather, this paper will consider what is involved in communicating an understandable and acceptable Gospel, and will reflect on that in the light of the incarnation.

## Communication that is Understandable.

For something to be understood, one must be able to relate it to what one already knows. One must be able to fit it into words and ideas with which one is already familiar. At the same time, one will also learn the distinctiveness of the new information from the old ideas in terms of the characteristics which distinguish it from the old.

Suppose one person said to another, "Aren't hipsiduddles wonderful?" The reply, in thought, if not in speech, would probably be, "What on earth are you talking about? What sort of explanation would be necessary in order that the word "hipsiduddles" be understood?"



Generally, a good explanation would relate what was problematic to what was already familiar. For example, "hipsiduddles" would need to be related to a more general family or class of objects, actions, qualities or whatever with which we were already familiar. Secondly, the characteristics of this particular thing which distinguish it from other members of the family or class would need to be identified.

Suppose we do not have the chance to ask for such an explanation. The other person has continued talking. "I saw five hipsiduddles on television last night." That tells us something more about the unknown object. It is something which can be seen, and which is countable. There are at least five of them in existence. "They come from Australia, you know." That suggests that the object in question is moveable. It could still be an animal, a group of people, perhaps a musical group, or a kind of gem stone, or something else. Once it has been determined which family or class of objects "hippsiduddles" belongs to, one is well on the way to understanding what they are. One then only needs to discover what are the distinguishing characteristics of these animals, people, gem stones, or whatever.

One problem that the missionaries faced when they first came to Thailand was how to explain who God was. They did not want to identify the Christian God with any of the spiritual or divine beings which the Thai people already knew. God was certainly not the Buddha; nor was He like the spirits, which the missionaries regarded as evil. Nor was God to be identified with the Hindu gods. In talking about God, they avoided the words used for the Buddha, the spirits, and the Hindu gods.

John Bowring, a British ambassador to Siam and contemporary of the early missionaries, described the problem the missionaries had in communicating their understanding of God. The word they used was prachao, made up from a prefix pra, and the word chao. The prefix pra had the idea of sacred power, and was used of Buddhist monks, and terms referring to Buddha images and the king. The word chao was the word most close to the British concept of the feudal "lord". It was used for such people as the aristocratic land-owners, senior spirits, and in the words for the king and the Buddha. Bowring said that this word for God was the cause of some confusion. It could easily be mistaken as applying to the Buddha, who was, for the Thai people, a "holy Lord". However, that mistake did not

persist long. It was soon evident that the missionaries did not respect the Buddha or Buddhism.

In order to explain the new religion, some missionaries, particularly in the north of Thailand, used the idea of the Ariya Mettaya. The Buddhists had a tradition of one who was greater than Gotama, the last Buddha, who would come and supercede him. However, the idea of the Ariya Mettaya was not well developed among the Thai people, and only had limited application for the missionaries. It did not give much content to the concept of God or explain much about who Jesus was.

The missionaries insisted that everyone who wanted to truly worship the Christian God first had to leave Buddhism and have nothing more to do with it. There was no room for fitting in Christianity alongside other religions. Christianity soon came to be understood as a different and alternative religion to Buddhism. Its God was to be understood in terms of Christianity's own system of doctrines.

Nevertheless, the Thai word for God, and the ways in which the missionaries spoke about Him, suggested certain characteristics and ways of relating to Him with which the Thai people were familiar. God was called "Lord". He was a living, personal being who was a potential patron. Indeed, the assertions made about His love and grace fitted the Thai conception of the ideal patron, as might be found in the ideal king, or nobleman. Some of the characteristics of the ideal patron are described in a study of Thai social relationships.

"Thai patrimonialism is paternalistic; its rulers are viewed as fathers. For example, the king is the father of "his" people, while the village leader is the father of the villagers. Ideally, the paternal father punishes his wards when they are naughty and rewards them with prebends when they are upright; he receives obedience and respect in return for dispensation of tangible, material benefits...

Thai patrimonialism is benevolent; the patrimonial leader, above all else, must be compassionate and understanding to those below him because the client's fate is in the grace of his hands." (Norman Jacobs, Modernization without Development - Thailand as an Asian Case Study. Praeger, New York. 1971 pp. 27-28.)



According to the teaching of the missionaries, God was indeed benevolent, compassionate, and understanding. He was a "father" to his people. He punished them when they did wrong and rewarded them when they did right and obeyed his commands. In these respects, the great Jehovah Lord, as they called Him, could be considered as a member of the class of patrons, a class which included the king, aristocratic noblemen, great and powerful spirits, and the Buddha himself. Such a classification would at least help people to know how to relate to God, what language to use when speaking to or about Him, how to approach Him, and what sorts of responses they might receive from Him. Such an identification was not necessarily made consciously or explicitly, but was implicit in the ways in which the people spoke to Him or about Him, using the special royal language, and in the expectations they had of God to give them His blessing, for example.

There were certain characteristics by which God could be distinguished from other Thai patrons. He was a spiritual being who could not be seen, but who was present everywhere. In this, He was similar to some of the spirit lords with which the Thai people were familiar. Unlike them, though, God's territory was unlimited, and His power was very much greater. Like the spirit Lords, He could cause sickness, and cure it. He could give safety in travel, or cause accidents to happen. He was compassionate to those who followed Him, although the missionaries made it quite clear that He was very demanding, and did not appreciate divided loyalties. Since He was much more powerful than other spirit lords, He could cure sicknesses that others had caused, and command spirits to leave people who were possessed.

In these ways, God was comparable to the spirits. He was also different from them. One missionary who worked in northern Thailand, John Freeman, noted the problem of distinguishing God from the spirits. He would point out that God was different in that He was the Creator. Nevertheless, this difference would only identify God as a unique member of the class of spirits.

God also took over the role of the Buddha for those who became Christians. He was the author, through Jesus, of a set of teaching and precepts. Unlike the Buddha, however, being a spirit patron, God was able to help His followers keep those precepts, and rewarded those who did with His blessing. Indeed, the missionaries proclaimed that those who accepted God as their patron (or lord), and

obeyed his teaching, would go to heaven, the place of great and permanent happiness.

In such ways, the idea of God could be related to existing ideas. God was a member of the class of patrons. He was also a member of the class of spirits. At the same time, there were many respects in which God was a unique member. The missionaries tended to be suspicious of such parallels when they were aware of them. Yet it was necessary for the idea of God to be related to other ideas for communication about Him to be meaningful.

The principle of relating new ideas to old ones still applies today. It is true not only of the idea of God but of all aspects of the Christian gospel. It must be related to ideas that people already have in order for it to be understood.

#### Communication that is Convincing.

That the Gospel is presented in an understandable way does not mean that it is convincing. People may hear the Gospel and understand it in terms of ideas with which they are already familiar without concluding that it is worth accepting. In order to be considered worthy of acceptance, it must be understood to be a worth-while answer to problems to which people were already seeking solutions. Or it must be seen as satisfying needs that people already believed that they had.

The heart of the missionaries' proclamation was the offer of the forgiveness of sins through the death of Christ on the cross. They believed themselves, and tried to persuade the Thai people, that their greatest problem was sin, and that they needed a Saviour. There are a small number of instances recorded of people who responded gratefully to this offer of forgiveness; but these instances are rare. It is also recorded that many people told the missionaries that they did not feel the need for such forgiveness. What wrong they did, they could always redress by making extra merit at the Buddhist temples.

Furthermore, the idea of a sacrificial atonement met with little response. There are no presuppositions within Thai conceptions or religious notions which indicate that a sacrifice is necessary for forgiveness to occur. Indeed, the idea that God's indulgence is not limitless and that a sacrifice is necessary for the sake of justice could be considered as a sign of weakness in God, as it would be of other patrons.



There is evidence to suggest that this difference between the missionaries' Gospel, and what is important to the Thai Christians exists today. In a sample of 30 sermons preached by Thai preachers in northern Thailand in 1980 and 1981, 3% mentioned forgiveness, and 10% mentioned Christ's death on the cross, generally without much expansion. The atonement was never explained. For the sake of comparison, in two collections of sermons by two missionaries, Christ's death on the cross was a significant point in 40% of the sermons, and forgiveness in 27%

In 1981, in over 30 churches in northern Thailand, the question was asked in the course of interviews with church elders, "How does Christianity give us salvation, in the thinking of the church members?". In not one church was any reference made to Jesus or Christ, let alone to His death or atonement. 42% of the responses suggested that salvation was something that God gives us out of His love (like an indulgent patron?). 21% referred to the necessity to follow the teaching of Christianity and do good. 17% referred to having faith in God.

In the same year, a questionnaire was given to 42 missionaries working with the Church of Christ in Thailand and also to Thai seminary students and other Christian tertiary students. One of the questions asked for the reasons why religion was important to the respondents. A list of 10 items had to be rated. For the missionaries, the item rated most highly by them was "forgiveness of sin". For the Thai Christians, this item was rated in 7th place.

It is pertinent that a number of the early Christian converts were people who were bothered by spirits. It was believed that if people did not satisfy local spirits to whom they were responsible, those spirits might take out their revenge on other people near-by. Another person in the vicinity might become sick, for example. In the ceremony in which the spirit-medium tried to discover the identity of the troublesome spirit and the person who was responsible for him, the sick person would call out the name. The person responsible could then be ostracised from the village and everything connected with him burnt to the ground. A number of these people who were so accused became Christians. They turned to God whom they were told had power over all spirits, so that the troublesome spirit would bother them no more.

Other people came to God after seeking the help of the local spirits but failing to find answers to their problems. Some of these people were sick, and had not been able to find a cure. Others were beset by famine. If God proved His power and overcame the sickness or famine, He was obviously greater than the other spirits, and worthy of being a patron of the people.

One of the Christian meetings which has attracted the most interest among non-Christians in recent times in northern Thailand was conducted in the Sports Ground in Chiang Mai in March 1982. It was advertised as "Miracles, Miracles". At the series of meetings, the preacher, an American, proclaimed that the healing of disease and sickness was possible there and then through faith in Jesus Christ. A number of people witnessed to healings having taken place at the meetings. Thousands attended the meetings, including villagers from miles around.

It has been noted that there are a number of parallels between the preacher and the many spirit-mediums who practice in Chiang Mai. Like them, he offered healing through his "spirit Lord". Like them, he called only for faith in this Lord. Perhaps the idea of God as a great and powerful Spirit is still pertinent, and demonstrations that His power is indeed greater than that of other local spirits are still convincing.

#### The Incarnation and Communication.

The Gospel, as it is understood and accepted in a particular time and place, will never be "pure" in the sense of being "culturally neutral". The ways in which it is understood will always reflect cultural conceptions, ideas, and ways of thinking. But is this antithetical to Biblical principles? In this last section of this paper, I wish to reflect on this question in the light of the Christian understanding of the nature of the incarnation, which is generally understood to be the pinnacle of God's acts of revelation in which He has communicated Himself to human beings.

The basic tenet of the doctrine of incarnation is the assertion that God meets us in the man Jesus. It involves the assertion that God meets us in a man who lived within certain geographic, racial, religious, and cultural boundaries, at a particular point within history. Such an assertion is, in many respects, preposterous and paradoxical.



That we should claim to meet God in a human being suggests that we are guilty of the heresy of confusing the Creator with His creation. The idea of limiting God in spatial and temporal terms, in terms of power and knowledge, to human language and a human frame, would appear to contradict our understanding of God. The idea of the incarnation appears to assert that God became something other than Himself, other than the One who is Almighty, Eternal, Omniscient and Omnipresent. What was infinite became finite. The incarnation implies that God took the risk of being misunderstood in order that there might be the possibility of communication.

The full and true nature of Jesus was often not recognized. Yet, many people did see God at work in Jesus. They saw Jesus as a prophet: a teacher like Moses, or a healer like Elijah. They recognized God's power in the miracles of healing, and in the exorcism of evil spirits.

Some people came to a much fuller understanding of who Jesus was and what God was communicating in Him. The disciples learnt slowly but gradually. The process did not stop at Jesus' death, or even at the resurrection. Jesus said to His disciples,

"I have more to tell you, but now it would be too much for you to bear. When, however, the Spirit comes, who reveals the truth about God, he will lead you into all the truth." (Jonh 16.12-13)

If God is infinite, then human beings will never be able to understand Him fully or completely. Thus, there is always the possibility of understanding God better. The understanding of God and the Gospel should be a dynamic process. We never come to the limits of our understanding, nor to the limits of what we are trying to understand. Our ideas can always be enlarged and developed, stretched and re-moulded.

One can see this dynamic process of growth in understanding in the Gospels as Jesus seeks to explain Himself. The Gospels present Him as using the category of "Messiah", with which the Jewish people were familiar. But Jesus uses it very carefully. He is not the type of Messiah the people were expecting. While the word was appropriate for Jesus in that it designated a unique person sent by God, it was inappropriate in as far as the Messiah was expected to be a kingly figure who would have great temporal power. Jesus tried to give the term a new

content as it is applied to Himself. While affirming its use for those who knew Him most intimately, He sought to change the conception. Contrary to the disciples expectations, it was possible for the Messiah to suffer and be killed!

When people learnt more about Jesus, they did not always want to follow Him, despite being convinced by the earlier demonstrations of power and by having their temporary needs met. (John 6:66) While the Gospel meets people where they are, He does not leave them there. He calls them to follow Him. While the Gospel must start with meeting people's needs and questions it cannot be limited to them. While recognizing God, there will be some who will not want to follow Him.

The process of communicating and understanding the Gospel are dynamic ones. Our ideas and concepts, in terms of which we think about God and about the Gospel, are limited, human tools. They are products of our culture, acquired in the processes of socialization. Yet they are the only tools we have for understanding. The incarnation demonstrates God's willingness to communicate within the context of language and ideas bound by culture and limited by human understanding. If we are to communicate successfully to others, we must use their ideas and concepts, despite the risks of mis-communication.

However, we need to constantly revise and expand our conceptions so that our understanding grows. The process of theologizing, the process of developing our understanding of God, has to begin with the ideas with which we understand Him at the present time. If we are helping others to understand God, we must begin with their ideas and ways of thinking. Because concepts arise within human linguistic and cultural settings, theologizing must occur within such settings.

It is possible that the slow growth of the church in Thailand has occurred partly because the Gospel has not been presented in a way which could easily be understood, nor, in a way in which it was seen to meet the problems people were facing. Some did respond to God, for example, as a great spirit Patron, These people were convinced by demonstratings of God's power when other spirit patrons had failed them. But such people responded to God despite what the missionaries said rather than because of it.

In order for the Gospel to be communicated effectively there needs to be further consideration of what are people's

deep concerns, and what aspects of their ideas and ways of thinking might be used to help them understand the Gospel.

There also needs to be a growth in understanding. There needs to be continual reflection upon the ideas about God and the Gospel which people have, such as those of "patron" and "spirit". In the light of the total experience of God, to which the Bible witnesses, which is found in the records of church history, and in contemporary witness throughout the world, questions need to be asked of our own theological understandings. In what ways are our present ideas and concepts helpful? In what ways are they inadequate? What aspects of them need to be developed and changed? Within this process, God will continue to reveal Himself.



## INCARNATION AND CHURCH LEADERSHIP IN THAILAND

Robert S. W. Collins

This paper is not so much a work of theological research as a cathartic essay on Thai Church leadership bolstered by historical and biblical observations.

The Incarnation refers to God's special "coming" to the world in Jesus. God seeks to communicate by entering history as a person at a particular time and in a particular culture. The relevant passages of scripture speak of Jesus as Immanuel, The Word, Son of Man, Son of God, Lord, and the Messiah (Christ). Many of these passages point to his life of service, vulnerability, rejection, and suffering. They reveal his leadership style. Accordingly, they reveal the "un-Christlikeness" and idolatry of Church leadership.

In this essay I want to outline first some thoughts on missionary and indigenous leadership in the Thai Church, then some biblical considerations, and finally speculations about where these might have led in the past and where they may lead in the future.

### 1. The Thai Church Leadership Situation

It is indisputable fact that the early Protestant missionaries brought many kinds of technological advance to Thailand. Thai Christians are very proud of this fact. Even Buddhist or secular citizens speak with appreciation of the missionaries' role in modern medicine, education, and printing. The missionaries first came to Thailand not so much as servants but as "pioneers". They were innovators, possessors of technology, efficient, and well-educated.

One wonders if this "pioneer" style of leadership could have been avoided by the missionaries. They might have said, like Paul, "I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified;" but what would have been the result of that? The Siamese thought the bearded, heavily-dressed and gowned farang (Westerners)



odd enough as it was. The only alternative for the missionaries was to reveal (proudly?) the efficient technology they possessed.

Thus, the missionaries (especially in North Thailand) became known as paw kru (Father Teacher) and mae kru (Mother Teacher) or in the case of doctors and their wives paw liang (Father Benefactor) and mae liang (Mother Benefactor). They were people with special knowledge and skills. Their life style was commensurate with these titles of "Father or Mother Teachers." They built fine homes, employed many workers, hob-nobbed with nobility, and owned the first automobiles. Again, it would seem that this style of life was unavoidable. Without certain of these amenities or pre-cautions they would have soon died; and indeed, some of them did (as the foreign cemeteries in Bangkok and Chiang Mai attest).

All this is history. This history's relation to the present leadership in the Thai Church is the relevant point. It seems to me that the early missionaries' leadership style has been unnecessarily perpetuated by succeeding generations of missionaries and "fraternal workers". Missionaries continued to insist on coming to Thailand as "pioneers", as innovators, as those with special expertise which they would teach to the "backward" Thais. This is true of very recent Mission history as well. Over the last thirty years missionaries in Thailand have "pioneered" in such areas as agriculture, audio-visuals, student-work, industrial evangelism, private higher education, and mass-communications. They have been able to do this on their (or their mission board's) own initiative, largely because they supplied funds and equipment. What church will refuse the offer of a shiny new "free" scheme or institution? These projects were inaugurated with much fan-fare, but they have usually fallen on hard times when foreign personnel and funding are withdrawn.

The life style of present-day missionaries is also largely patterned after those of the 19th centuries. Clustered in large population centers (especially Bangkok and Chiang Mai), they continue to socialize with their own kind and with upper-class Thais through the international schools, English-speaking churches, Rotary Clubs, and similar institutions. They live comfortably, if not sumptuously, with many of the amenities offered by Western (or Japanese) technology. They are efficient, fully equipped with good automobiles, extra-large refrigerators, and sometimes even computers and video-tape machines.

In recent years the slogan "working yourself out of a job" has been suggested as portraying the proper attitude for modern missionaries. The idea is to seek indigenous leadership to take the missionaries' place when they leave "the field". This may take a long time, but it remains the missionary goal. It is at best a questionable goal, as very often the missionary seeks to begin (as suggested above) a "new job" which may or may not be among the priorities of the Thai Church. At its worst, it is the rankest paternalism.<sup>1</sup>

Let's turn from the missionary to patterns of Thai leadership in the Church. Historically, the missionaries (mostly Presbyterian) emphasized the development of a highly trained cadre of leaders among the Thai people. It was assumed that being Christian brought with it the possibility of being literate; and being a Church leader brought the promise of "higher" education. Thus institutions were established for the training of pastors and/or ordained ministers. Missionaries selected candidates for leadership (often the sons of their cooks, gardeners, or watchmen), then funded and oversaw their training.

These early trainees and succeeding generations of church leaders naturally emulated the style of the missionaries. They kept to the urban centers, aspiring to positions of power and influence. They hoped for, and sometimes achieved, an economic level comparable to that of the missionaries. Study abroad was a much sought-after perquisite of the "servant of the Church". (Missionary Furloughs!) Nepotism was (and is) common, as sons and daughters of the Thai church leaders went abroad, first to study, and later to live permanently. The church leaders often led by decree rather than by example. Both "ruling" and "teaching" elders looked to the example of paw kru for their style of leadership. In local congregations, an elder who had slightly more education or higher economic position than other members would "lord it over them", acting as a sort of "layPope". This is still a common figure in Northern Thai congregations.

Perhaps it may be said that among contemporary Thai church leaders there is a confusion of leadership as "position" rather than as "function".<sup>2</sup> Both pastors and ruling elders assume that they have "arrived" at a particular status. What they "do" as leaders seems to be considered secondary. Ordinary members of the congregation apparently share this assumption. One often hears of



ordained ministers lobbying for more "respect" and "honor" in the Church "like they honor their pastors in Korea" or else-where. Highly trained ministers seek positions in large town churches, or, more commonly, in church institutions. Again, this seems parallel to the missionary style of leadership. It is at least a longing for the status of Paw kru.

It is doubtful that this state of affairs is unique to the Church of Christ in Thailand. Church leadership in other countries is plagued with social climbing and status seeking. Indeed, this is the pattern in the wider Thai society. The paw liang and the honored acharn (teacher) are not to be found only in the Church. The question still remains: What patterns of leadership might have developed if missionaries had paid more attention to the Incarnation in their teaching and example?

## 2. Biblical Considerations

The New Testament speaks in many ways and contexts about the Incarnation. In this section, I want to bring together several passages which are especially relevant to the theme of leadership or apostleship. As noted in the introduction to this paper, many New Testament references to the Incarnation present Jesus' obedience, service, vulnerability, rejection, or suffering. In some of these it is stated more clearly than others. For instance, in Philipians 2:5-8, a hymn of the Incarnation quoted by Paul, Jesus is described as not grasping divine perquisites, but emptying himself, and obeying. In Mark 10:45 Jesus says, "The Son of Man came.... to serve, and give himself as a ransom for many." In II Cor. 8:9 Paul says, "Though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor." "The Word became flesh." (John 1:14) Jesus was born "under the Law", (Gal. 4:4) Both of these last two indicate his obedience and vulnerability. "He came to his own, but his own received him not". (John 1:11) This is rejection. Knowing that "he had come from God and that he was going to God... /Jesus/ began to wash the disciples' feet." (John 13:3,5) This is service. Even the story of Jesus' birth in Luke shows the vulnerability of the Incarnate One, "laid in a manger, because there was no room in the inn." (Luke 2:7)<sup>3</sup> After Peter's recognition that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God (the expected one in Israel), Jesus begins to teach that he must suffer and die. (Matt. 16:16,21)

It can hardly be disputed that an important aspect of the Incarnation is the obedience and suffering of Jesus.

Paul insisted on knowing nothing among the Corinthians except Christ, and him crucified. A correlative theme in these passages is the emphasis that Jesus' followers (Church leaders) must also be obedient, rejected, vulnerable, serving, and suffering. Christians should behave as the Lord Jesus did. For example, the context of the hymn on the Incarnation in Philippians 2 is the exhortation that the Christians in Philippi should be humble, regarding others as better than themselves. "Think this way among yourselves, the way Jesus Christ thought." They should have the attitude of Jesus, who humbled himself, took the form of servant, was obedient, even to death. Like-wise, the context for Jesus' statement that he came "to serve and give his life" is the instruction that the disciples must not lead by force and power, but by serving. (Mk. 10:42-44) It is Jesus' response to James and John's grasping after power and position. In John 13 Jesus' example of foot-washing (service) is followed by his urging that the disciples should do the same for one another. The Incarnate One, as described in John 1 and Galatians 4, gives believers the opportunity to be "children of God" (Sons and Heirs). This implies a duty to obey and serve responsibly in the Father's house. Only a few verses after Peter's confession Matthew 16 records Jesus as saying, "If any one would come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me." Even Paul's statement that Jesus became poor so that we could become rich appears in the context of an appeal that the Corinthians should give sacrificially. (II Cor. 8:1-15) Finally, it is interesting to note that Kosuke Koyama regards "no room in the inn" as equivalent to a command to remember the outcaste and neglected.<sup>4</sup>

In summary, we may say that New Testament references to the Incarnation not only emphasize Jesus' obedience, service, and suffering; but they almost invariably make some reference to the corresponding obedience, service, and suffering of his followers. Koyama calls these aspects of Christian life the central "stigmata" of the cross.<sup>5</sup> They are the marks of Jesus. Paul commends himself to the Christians of Galatia (Gal. 6:17) and Corinth (II Cor. 11:23-29) as one with such marks. So a relevant question for Christian leaders is this: who is going to believe our Gospel if we don't bear the marks of it in our lives?<sup>6</sup>



### 3. If Christian Leaders had the Marks of Christ

Leaders in the Church (missionaries and Thai) have not shown the marks of Jesus in their leading. They have been lured by the promise of prestige, position, of efficient technology. They have evangelized in triumphalistic crusades, and they have equated western wealth and expertise with the Christian life. Their style of leadership has been like that of the Gentiles. (Mk. 10:42) They have created structures which are patterned after the world and lack the marks of Jesus.

It would be interesting to speculate about the condition of the Church in Thailand had earlier leaders exhibited more of the stigmata of Christ. Speculations about the earliest missionaries are most difficult. It seems likely (as indicated above) that a life style of relative affluence was necessary for medical reasons. Similarly, a close association with royalty and others of power and influence was unavoidable for political reasons. Death from disease or expulsion by the authorities would hardly have led to the rooting of a church in Thailand.

But what of later generations of missionaries and church leaders? Was it necessary to create and perpetuate the model of paw kru and Paw liang after the Church began to grow? Some will offer the observation that missionaries did not bring these titles or positions to Thailand. They were already part of the pattern of Thai social relationships. The paw liang was the benevolent patron who looked after the needs of his clients. He maintained order in a kindly sort of way, making important decisions. The people tried to please and agree with the patron. Today it is still very common to hear ordinary folk repeating the litany, "Whatever the man says."

Thus, it may be said that missionaries have always assumed a role which was already an integral part of Thai society. They shared it with merchants, land owners, village and district head-men, government officials, and senior monks. (It may also be suggested that the missionaries were understood as presenting God - and/or Jesus - as the great benevolent teacher-patron - an incomplete, but certainly not a wrong idea of God.) So it seems evident that the development of the paw liang-paw kru pattern of church leadership was a successful adaption to contemporary Thai social patterns. If the paw liang is a "good" person, sincerely interested in the welfare of the "little people", then this is a legitimate mode for church leadership. Perhaps the patron can be a servant, and the

whole society will prosper. If it is the accepted cultural pattern, then Jesus' style and teachings seem to be in serious conflict with the culture. The stigmata of the cross are unacceptable in Thai society. What should be our stance in the light of the New Testament? If we reject paw liang-paw kru are we rejecting the culture? If we reject the "marks" of Jesus have we missed the Incarnation?

What might the situation of the Thai church be if the "stigmata" of Christ were more prominent? A pessimist might say that no church would exist in Thailand. My guess is that there would be fewer church members; however, fewer of them would be nominal believers and graspers after position. The game of church politics would decline in importance. Certainly the marks of Jesus would have their effects in other areas, such as self-support and corruption. For Christians to live "incarnationally" would be revolutionary.

FOOTNOTES

- <sup>1</sup>The "work yourself out of a job" theory of mission was categorically rejected by the General Secretary of the CCT in a speech given at the retreat for ecumenical personnel in December, 1976. See Koson Srisang, "On Missionary Identification with Thai Suffering and Hope," (Mimeographed, 1976).
- <sup>2</sup>See Brian Morgan, "A Brief Description of C.C.T. Rural Congregational Life," (unpublished typescript, 1979). pp. 6-10. Morgan clearly describes this confusion of roles.
- <sup>3</sup>This kind of vulnerability is also hinted at in John 1:14 by the verb "dwelt" (pitched his tent) among us. The Word did not live in a walled compound or a sturdy building. He had no place to lay his head. (Matt. 8:20)
- <sup>4</sup>Kosuke Koyama, Three Mile an Hour God (London: SCM Press, 1979) p. 127.
- <sup>5</sup>Kosuke Koyama, No Handle on the Cross (London: SCM Press, 1976) pp. 33, 38-39.
- <sup>6</sup>Ibid. p. 33.



THEOLOGY FROM THE MOUNTAIN TOP  
Incarnation, Mission, Dialogue

Sigmund J. Laschenski, S.J.

Introduction

Give-and-take, or, to put it another way, searching for the truth with others of non-Christian belief, has not been a noticeable trend in Christian mission over the centuries. From our stronghold in Europe, and later, North America, we Christians have viewed the rest of the world as in dire need of what we had to give, the gospel, and ignorant of the truth which we possessed.

Today, however, a growing number of missionaries, Protestant and Catholic alike, are finding themselves forced to ask whether they may, perhaps, have something to receive as well in the way of religious enlightenment from their non-Christian neighbors. Indeed, might it not be possible, even necessary, to seek the truth together? At the least, after two hundred years of Christian mission with little proportionate result in Thailand, for example, there is an increasing uneasiness that something is amiss somewhere. Maybe we're not doing it right.

Such uneasiness brought three missionaries and two overseas volunteers, four Protestant ministers and one Catholic priest, together for three days in March 1982 at Khun Tan, a mountain top in northern Thailand, to theologize on the Incarnation and its meaning for the Thai Church. This was a group of friends in the Lord, who had come to know and trust each other over the years. The discussions, unhampered by inhibitions, were an attempt at searching for the truth together, albeit within the Christian ambit.

Considerable time was given to the meaning of the Incarnation itself, especially to the uniqueness of our encounter with God in Jesus, that is, the divinity of Christ. No consensus was reached on this point, not so much on the part of some wanting to reject the divinity of Christ outright, as their being struck with the mystery of Jesus and shying away from a desire to categorize it.



Such a lack of unanimity on the uniqueness of Christ impaired, necessarily, our theological endeavor, and pointed out the need for further reflection, prayer and discussion on that point. Nevertheless this lack of consensus on so vital a question as the divinity of Christ did not paralyze the meeting. Why?

Because, as a matter of fact, we all accept the uniqueness of Christ, the Son of God, in everyday life. It is He who binds us together. We knew that Christ was in our midst at Khun Tan. Those who accepted the divinity of Christ in traditional terms might have wished that the others would do likewise. Nevertheless, the former could understand and accept it if the latter, because of their background and approach to life, could not commit themselves to such a theological definition. For each of us Christ was the central figure of our lives, and we agreed about Him in so many ways, that it was easy to continue the round-table discussions. The group facilitator put it this way: "In the Incarnation God did something of overwhelming significance to our understanding of God himself, an event that involved suffering, obedience and total self-giving by Christ. It is clear, then, from Scripture that the Church is expected to respond in servanthood, obedience and suffering to that of Christ." And this led to the next point for reflection: the Church and its response to the Incarnation in Thai society.

Here the Church, especially in its leadership, both foreign missionary and Thai, came under severe criticism as the antithesis of an Incarnational response in servanthood, obedience and suffering. Yet, as the discussion progressed, it became clear that an assessment of the past cannot be made in harsh, negative terms alone. The intricacies of one's environment, as well as one's mind-set, very much the product of the age he lives in, condition the Incarnational response of a missionary. Looking back it is not always easy to discern what would have been the best way, after all. Even today, certain as we are, that the response of the Church to Christ in the world must be in terms of conversion, self-emptying and service of our fellow men and women, we still puzzle over how to do it. How to reach out to the people of Thailand with a gospel that will be for them truly good news? "To what extent," one of the participants asked, "can the Christian community, or should the Christian community, reinterpret its understanding of the gospel within the cultural context? And what is that which is so much central

to Christianity that we cannot or should not modify it?"

The assumption underlying that question, however, was immediately challenged by one of the other participants, who urged us to drop a pattern of thinking which demands central, unavoidable truths. Rather, he suggested the spider-web model. "The web is held together by many, many strands, some of which are more important than others, but none of which, is essential to supporting the web." Explaining further he said, "Basically, then, what I've argued is that theology, the Christian faith, needs to be expressed, if it is going to be assimilated at all, in terms that are comprehensible. It has to be expressed within Thai concepts or in the framework of the pre-suppositions of ideas that fit within the culture of Thailand. If this cannot be done, there is either misunderstanding, or learning without assimilation, or simply rejection."

Immediately a third member of the group countered with the viewpoint that Christ is one who shatters cultural preconceptions and values.

Yet the fact remains that Christ assumed the cultural identity of a religious Jew. What identity should a Thai Christian have? a Karen?

In the end discussion was drawn to the relationship between Christianity and Buddhism. Is Christ the only way, thus alienating Christianity from Buddhism? Is the path of the Buddha a true way in any sense? What is missing? The answers were varied. An openness to Buddhism was evident. Beyond that we didn't know how to proceed, where to go.

## Dialogue

In the light of the Khun Tan reflections, the thoughts to follow will attempt to carry the discussion a step further, focusing on dialogue as a fundamental step for an encounter with Buddhism, that is for Christian mission.

Dialogue is a mutual exchange between persons. It involves two-way communication: a sharing of one's views, convictions and feelings in all honesty, and listening to the other with an open heart. Dialogue demands trust. The goal of dialogue is friendship, understanding of the other, and mutual help in arriving at the truth. Dialogue implies risk: the risk of misunderstanding, and the risk that the light of further truth will challenge one's present convictions. On the other hand, dialogue enriches one's own understanding of the truth.



## The Incarnation and Dialogue

The Incarnation is God's becoming a particular man, Jesus of Nazareth. In Jesus God sought out the men and women of Israel. After His death and resurrection, Jesus is alive today in the Church through the power of the Holy Spirit. In Jesus God continues to seek His people everywhere. The Incarnation is on God's part a profound, dialogic act.

Through the Incarnation God reaches out to men and women in a way they can see and hear. They can respond in dialogue, they can misunderstand the message, or they can simply reject Christ for whatever reason. In any case, the invitation to dialogue in Jesus is fundamentally recognizable in human terms. In this dialogue God goes all the way through Jesus in searching, as it were, for an understanding of the human condition. He becomes a human being, not merely for the sake of being human, but to draw humanity to Himself.

The Church is Christ incarnate in the world today. The dialogue is continued through the Church. The Church must be ever in open, meaningful exchange with the men and women of the world in order both to purify its own understanding of the Word, and to offer to all the opportunity to meet the Truth, God, in Jesus.

When God became man, He did not risk, as we must do in dialogue, the changing of His understanding of the truth. He is the Truth. His is rather the risk of being misunderstood by the very ones He seeks, because of their bias, their misunderstanding of Christ, or of His image in the Church.

We, the Church, are Christ visible in the world today. Thus, entering into God's dialogue with the world, we share the risk. In the Church we possess the Truth. But our human condition precludes a full possession of that Truth. In the dialogic process we expose ourselves to the enrichment of our understanding of the Truth and to the possibility of change. Sharing the Truth as we understand it, we search with the other for a further understanding of that Truth.

The Church, then, must be of the people of Thailand, in meaningful interchange with persons of non-Christian religions, interiorizing not only their customs, ways of thinking, speaking and acting, but their religion as well, to the extent that this is possible. At the same time we witness to Christ and His message. This means a break with the past, emerging from the ghetto. Surely it means



taking a risk. Evangelization always entails risk. Every Christian will not be able to do this in the same way, at the same time, or on the same level. But we should begin.

### Interreligious Dialogue in Chiang Mai

Beginnings at religious dialogue have already been made in the south, northeast and north of Thailand. They are still sporadic, dependent on the interest of individual Christians, and looked upon as something of an oddity by the body of the Church. But interest is growing.

One such attempt has been the Interreligious Dialogue Group in Chiang Mai, northern Thailand, founded seven years ago by Buddhist, Muslim and Christian leaders. The group has met at least once a month year in and year out. There have been years when membership dwindled to the founders only. The last two years, however, participation has reached as high as a hundred. Most of the people who come are devout Buddhist laymen and women from every walk of life, from professors and lawyers to housewives and simple villagers. A saintly Buddhist abbot, one of the founders of the group, is the one who draws them. A handful of Catholics have joined, the Bishop of Chiang Mai being also one of the group's founders. A sizable number of Protestants is there. The Muslims, however, have dropped out.

Over the years a deep trust has grown between these Buddhists and Christians. The spirit of fellowship is tangible. Most striking is the thirst for religious truth. All come with a longing to hear the word, whether of Christ or the Buddha, and to live by it. Everyone listens intently to the other. None feels threatened, and many speak out, questioning and contributing their own ideas on a particular subject under discussion. All want to understand the other's position, and find it an enrichment of their own. Each feels secure in his own religious tradition, yet there is a desire to find where we meet, where we believe the same thing deep down even though that belief may be expressed in different language due to our diverse philosophical and cultural backgrounds.

The exchange has stimulated the Catholic Bishop of Chiang Mai to pioneer in efforts to express Christianity in terms comprehensible to Buddhists.

From a Christian perspective what has happened so far in this group is the building of community among people who

were formerly unknown, if not suspicious of one another; a deepening of one's understanding of the other both as Buddhist and as neighbor; a renewal of spirit in one's Christian faith as a result of the encounter with Buddhist teaching and with the good will and fervor of the Buddhist participants. The Holy Spirit is clearly at work in the interaction of the group. On more than one occasion this author has experienced a fresh Christian vision of life and renewed hope for the world from listening to the thoughts of others at a meeting, especially to those of the abbot.

Throughout the entire process evangelization is taking place, not for the purpose of gaining converts, but to share the Truth as we know it in terms of our religious background, as well as to view it from another background and point of view. Joyful witness has been given to Christ and His Church in these meetings. The Christian message is always asked for and listened to. The seed has been sown. God will water the planted seed in His way within the cultural and religious context of the lives of those who receive it.

What do you think?

When a Christian missionary lives for sometime in another land and reflects on his life and work, on Christianity and Incarnation, critical questions arise jarring his deepest convictions.

It is our belief that in Jesus, the Christ, God become man and living with us today, is the Way, the Truth and the Life. If this is so, why does Christianity remain a tiny minority in most of Asia and certainly in Thailand, apparently unacceptable and unpalatable to the vast majority? And why does Buddhism, with its culturally integrated Brahminism and animism, serve as a satisfactory way, truth and life for these same people? What does this mean?

It is striking that Thailand has been open to and adapted foreign cultural influences and new ideas of every kind. The sole exception is Christianity.

In the seminary we learned that Christianity is the ordinary way of salvation, and allowed for God's extraordinary saving action through baptism of desire, even if implicit and virtual. Yet it is obvious that in Asia, in Thailand, numerically speaking, Christianity is the extraordinary way to heaven. The ordinary way in Thailand surely must be through Buddhism and the human



conscience, unless you hold that all non-Christians are lost; an untenable position for one who takes seriously God's universal salvific will and the fact that Christ died for all. What does this mean?

Moving from the realm of theology to religious experience, the missionary has occasion to meet both Buddhist monks and laymen who are holy people, that is, whose lives are in tune with Buddhism and humanity at the deepest levels. We would have to say that they are close to God. What does this mean?

People are looking for that which brings peace, strength and hope. They are looking for good news in a world full of oppression, sickness and frustration. We have the good news. Yet, for some reason, we can't get it across. We come across, it seems, only as another sect, and of a foreign religion, at that. What does this mean?

Theologically Christ and Christianity are the unique way to salvation. In terms of everyday life for millions of people, are they? Is something missing in our theological perspective, in our missionary approach, in us? What?

Such are the questions that disquiet a Christian missionary today. Grave questions, indeed. Who will answer them, if not the missionaries themselves.

## Conclusion

The Christian missionary lives in an age of challenge. If he is alive to the challenge and struggles to meet it, he is doing God's work, and life is exciting.

## Open to others

To struggle with the challenge is to be open to people, as Christ was, no matter what their religious persuasion, morality or condition of life; as Christ was, open to all, especially the little people in society, the economically poor and socially oppressed—extending the hand of friendship, opening doors, allowing them to experience God's love in Christ in new ways. The experience of loving concern is always good news.

## A prayerful people

Meeting the challenge demands that Christian missionaries become a prayerful people. Communion with God should come first. This requires time, quiet and a



radical change in life-style for most. But then, perhaps, with the help of the Spirit, they will begin to find answers to the questions posed above.

### In dialogue

Rising to the challenge surely calls for dialogue with our neighbor, continuing dialogue on many levels, above all on the level of religion. It is man's destiny to seek Truth, Goodness and Beauty. The Christian missionary is no exception. Faithful to that which we already possess, let us join our fellow men and women in the search for a fuller possession of that Truth, Beauty and Goodness which will only be complete in eternal life with our Lord and God. Thus, perhaps, can we begin to answer the questions above. At the same time we must raise our voice in witness of that Truth, Goodness and Beauty as expressed in the gospel and in the daily struggle for human dignity, justice and compassion.

The traditional missionary way has been to preach the good news of salvation in Christ, just like that, wherever one was sent; to conduct schools, hospitals, development projects as a service and way of access to society for preaching the gospel; to build up the local Church for continuing the same.

Certainly much has been accomplished in this way and this way will continue for a long time to come. But is it sufficient? Is it the best way? Does the Lord want us to continue like this? The world and the present position of Christianity in Asia and in Thailand force such questions to our attention.

The time has come for deep reflection, to look for answers and explore new ways. At least some of the Christian community should begin, not least of all, the missionaries.

## THE KHUN TAN ROUND TABLE

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